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AUTHOR Aust, Charles F.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the parenting behaviors portrayed on "The Cosby Show" to determine the use of specific parenting skills and family relationship-enhancing communication techniques. Videotapes of nine randomly chosen broadcast episodes were content analyzed according to family communication models of Thomas P. Gordon (1970), Bernard J. Guerney (1977), and Saf Lerman (1985). The data revealed extensive use of parenting and other interpersonal verbal and non-verbal communication skills, as well as three general approaches, including lack of physical punishment, lack of derogation of the person, and lack of impulsive hostility toward children. Twelve specific techniques found which model psychologically healthy family communication skills include sharing feelings; allowing alternatives instead of commands; maintaining composure in the face of sensitive and emotional issues; taking decisions to logical conclusions; setting limits; role playing to show consequences; encouraging expression and awareness of feelings; sharing problem-solving with children; accepting responsibilities; evidencing appropriate expressions of anger and displeasure; spending time together; and modeling values and beliefs. (One table of data is included; 15 references are attached.) (KEH)

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RELATIONSHIP-ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE COSBY SHOW*

by Charles F. Aust**

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**The author is an instructor of mass communication at West Georgia College, Carrollton, GA. 30118 (404 836 6518). He had previously worked as a child protective services caseworker and drug and alcohol abuse prevention specialist.

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RELATIONSHIP-ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

IN THE COSBY SHOW

ABSTRACT

Content of nine episodes of The Cosby Show was analyzed for relationship-enhancing communication skills based on family communication models of Gordon, Guerney and Lerman. Parenting and other interpersonal verbal and nonverbal communication skills were found to be extensively used, as well as three general approaches - lack of physical punishment, lack of derogation of the person, and lack of impulsive hostility toward children. Such skills and approaches could be acquired through unintentional social learning or as an adjunct to education programs and counseling. Huge monetary profits and modeling of psychologically healthy communication skills in the same network programming are possible. The Cosby Show is an example.

A dearth of research exists that examines prime-time situation comedies for information about and modeling of specific parenting skills or family relationship-enhancing communication techniques. Dail and Way (1985) explored the extent and type of parenting behaviors in prime-time, family-oriented programs. Parenting behaviors are extensively portrayed, they concluded. However, their research into the types of behavior was done using catagorizations that delineated styles and roles rather than exact skills and techniques. Child-rearing styles were labelled as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive or neutral. Parental roles were coded as instrumental (e.g., directive, disciplinarian, aggressive, firm), expressive (e.g., nurturing, supportive, flexible, accepting), or neutral. Skill, Robinson and Wallace (1987) examined prime-time television over a six-year period, but looked not at communication skills in families portrayed. Their research dealt with the structures of the families and how frequently they appeared, in situation comedies and other program genre.

It has been shown that in situation comedies the standard approach to humor has been the utilization of hostile or derogatory humor (Stocking, Sapolsky and Zillmann, 1977) and that situation comedies contain high rates of verbal aggression (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin and Neuendorf, 1982). Yet one recently introduced situation comedy seems to feature not only the absence of hostile, derogatory humor or verbal aggression, but also includes specific relationship-enhancing communication skills that foster intimacy and good will among

family members. That program is The Cosby Show, which this research analyzed as a possible source of healthy, relationship-enhancing verbal and non-verbal communication skills and techniques between parents and children. This content analysis delineates those specific skills and techniques, and the frequency with which they are used in the series.

The Cosby Show enjoys extremely high popularity among television viewers. It was the top network show in audience ratings 26 of the 29 weeks it was broadcast in the 1986-1987 prime-time viewing season.[1] This situation comedy also has become the record-breaking earner of syndication sales, nearing $500 million at the end of the second year on the air (Paskowski, 1987). It contains the most expensive commercial spots at between $400,000 and $450,000 per 30-second spot (Cosby Costs, 1987).

Bill Cosby, creator and star of the program, has described his dedication to educating about healthy communication and relationships by saying, "All I do has to do with some form of education, some form of giving a message to people" (Cosby: Life, 1986). Biographer Ronald L. Smith (1986) confirms the comedian's goal with the observation that "most episodes of the show involve questions of parental trust and communication" (p. 190). Cosby himself has stated a psychological theme is contained in the show:

> I said to the writers I don't want sitcom jokes. I don't want jokes about behinds or breasts or pimples or characters saying "O my god" every other line. What we want to deal with is human behavior. (Smith, 1986, p. 178)

Toward that end, a Harvard University psychiatrist, Dr. Alvin Poussaint, has been used as an adviser by the script-writers (Smith, 1986).

The Cosby Show portrays a black family living in a large metropolitan area. Cliff, the father (Cosby), works as an obstetrician with an office in the home. Clair, the mother, is a lawyer. At the time of data collection, the five children were portrayed as follows: Sondra in college, Denise a senior in high school, Theo also in high school but younger than Denise, Vanessa in her early teens, and Rudy (a girl) about kindergarten or first grade age. Cliff's parents make regular appearances, as well as various friends of the children, including Peter (same-age friend of Rudy) and Walter (nicknamed "Cockroach," same-aged friend of Theo). The family's lifestyle is comfortable, middle-class, with a high degree of verbal skills exhibited by all. It can be argued that the family is atypical from most families, but because family composition, behavior and styles of living have become so diverse in the pluralistic American culture, portrayal of a "typical" or "representative" American family is virtually impossible within the framework of a family-oriented situation comedy.

METHOD AND CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Videotapes of nine broadcast episodes were made between March 6, 1986 and September 25, 1986. The last taped show coincidentally was the 1986-1987 season premier. Episodes were taped by an audio-visual recording technician who was unaware of the purpose of the research. No attempt was made to select the sample based on theme or plot. Episodes were taped in a sporadic fashion because of periodic unavailability of personnel or equipment on broadcast dates. Once nine episodes were recorded, these were selected because of the intermittent random procurement of the recordings. The broadcast dates were (all 1986) March 6, July 3 and 24, August 7, 21 and 28, September 11, 18 and 25. The researcher and the recording technician had no prior knowledge of content.

Each episode was analyzed in its entirety for an examination of all verbal and non-verbal communication. The author of this research coded interactions in the episodes to be relationship-enhancing or effective parenting action if they represented skills and techniques of one of three models of effective interfamily communication: Thomas P. Gordon's (1970) Parent Effectiveness Training; Bernard J. Guerney's (1977) Relationship Enhancement; and Saf Lerman's (1985) How To Be A Better Parent. Because of previous professional social service work and training, the coder possessed applied knowledge of the skills and techniques contained in these three models which aided in the accuracy of the coding process.

Gordon offers specific skills for "active listening," "I-messages" (assertive self-disclosure), problem-solving, acceptance, determining problem ownership, effective confrontation and changing unacceptable behavior. The author proposes that parent-child relationships and communication are helped by the use of such skills, and will result in psychologically healthier children and parents.

Guerney offers highly specific behavioral skills to accomplish a number of goals that are thought to increase personal satisfaction with relationships and with self, and to effectively solve relationship conflicts. The skills include empathic acceptance, recognizing and accepting one's own feelings and those of others, recognizing the subjective nature of one's view of interpersonal issues, helping others to understand their own motives more clearly, and expressing thoughts and feelings in highly specific ways.

Lerman's work offers many suggestions about a wide variety of specific issues and everyday concrete events faced by parents. It takes a down-to-earth, "here's what you can do" approach. The suggestions include conversational styles, age-appropriate expectations, humor, offering choices instead of threats, redirecting attention, alternatives to physical punishment, role-reversal role playing, praising desired behavior and listening to encourage emotional expression. Issues addressed include preparing children for a new baby, sharing sex information, discussing separation, divorce and remarriage, dealing with death and other fears, teaching children self-reliance, and improving self-confidence and self-esteem.

RESULTS

A typology of 12 different skills and techniques emerged from the data, corresponding to skills and techniques of the family interaction models constructed by Gordon, Guerney and Lerman. This typology (see Table 1) represents a multitude of specific interactions found in the sampled programs. The number following each technique, representing the number of portrayals of that technique, totalled 49 for an average of 5.4 skills protrayed per episode. This breaks down to one portrayal every 4.25 minutes, based on a 23-minute episode.

In one episode, after an opening scene showing family members in their established roles, the remainder of the episode used a very powerful and unusual communication technique of role play, advocated by all three models of interfamily communication. All members of the family adopted a completely different identity in order to impress upon Theo the harsh financial realities of embarking on a self-supported life.[2]

The everyday concrete suggestions of Lerman's parenting approach were the most frequently identified skills in the typology which emerged from the data (see Table 1). All 12 types of skills reflect some approach recommended by Lerman. Nine of the 12 techniques relate to Gordon's approach to parent-child communication. Half of the techniques correspond to Guerney's relationship-enhancement orientation to family interaction.

The data support the argument that relationship-enhancing verbal and non-verbal communication techniques between parents and children are frequently featured on this most popular and most financially successful situation comedy. Dail and Way's (1985) conclusion that parenting behaviors are extensively portrayed is supported.

In addition to specific techniques, three generalized approaches were observed across all episodes. The parents generally are slow to anger, hesitating before reacting, which could be regarded as an acting technique common to situation comedies. However, it also could be viewed as an attempt by the parents to "keep cool" or think before acting, which is a suggestion made in public service announcements for the prevention of child abuse.

In all episodes sampled, corporal punishment was absent. Children were never subjected to physical pain or threats of pain. Gordon and Lerman both stress the need to avoid physical infliction of pain when disciplining or otherwise interacting with children.

All episodes were devoid of name-calling and derogatory comments or judgments of the children's self-worth. Behaviors were criticized or labelled as unsatisfactory or unacceptable, but never was any person rejected or ridiculed. All three models of family communication emphasize this distinction between rejecting or ridiculing a behavior versus rejecting or ridiculing the self-worth of the person.

The absence of these three conditions - impulsive anger, physical punishment, and derogation of the child's self-worth - lend further support to the conclusion that The Cosby Show features healthy parent-child interaction approaches.

The following are examples of each of the 12 skills or techniques portrayed in the program:

1. Reflecting content/feeling - Rudy has made a big mess in the kitchen after disobediently using Cliff's juicer, and has fearfully retreated to her room. Clair comes in to talk to Rudy and acknowledges Rudy's fear about getting into trouble.

2. Alternatives instead of commands - Denise will be announcing her college choice after dinner and Rudy is sad about Denise's upcoming departure. Cliff and Rudy review several options of how to deal with the issue. They consider telling Denise not to go, and then consider allowing Denise, because she'll come back for holidays, and then they decide maybe to visit Denise at the college. Rudy has decided on her own not to tell Denise not to go and feels better about it all.

3. Composure in the face of sensitive/emotional issues - Rudy has discovered a snake in the basement and is deathly afraid of it. Clair comes home and hears of the situation, but remains calm in front of Rudy, even though she later indicates to Cliff that she too is deathly afraid of it.

4. Taking decisions/behavior to logical conclusion - Walter is disgusted about having to study for a math test, and questions the relevance of math to the rest of his life. Cliff helps Walter realize that if he does inherit his father's

scrap iron business, he'll get defrauded by his accountant and foreman if he depends on them to know how to handle math but he himself is ignorant of it.

5. Setting limits - Rudy must go to bed because it's her usual bedtime, but she wants to keep telling Grandma knock-knock jokes. Clair gently but insistently tells the little girl repeatedly that it's time for bed and no more jokes.

6. Role play to show consequences/generate insight - Theo, caught in a role play by the family acting as strangers to him in an apartment complex, has just convinced the landlord (Cliff) to rent him the apartment (his own bedroom, emptied of all belongings overnight while he slept over at Walter's). Theo thinks the role play is now over and gleefully asks his dad to give him back his furniture and personal belongings. However, the role play is going to last 24 hours, so Theo has to still obtain furniture, get the phone hooked up, pay for electricity service to begin, and all those things usually associated with starting living arrangements on one's own... and the money needed to do all these arrangements.

7. Encourage expression and awareness of feelings/behaviors - Rudy's prohibited use of the juicer has resulted in the big mess in the kitchen, and Clair has found Rudy in her bedroom. She doesn't accuse Rudy, but gives the little girl a chance to admit her mistake. Clair says: "You know, Rudy, you can always tell me the truth about anything and it really doesn't matter what it is, because I'll still love you."

8. Sharing problem-solving/tasks with children - for Cliff's parents' wedding anniversary, the viewer learns from conversation on the show that all members of the family have "chipped in" to pay for the gift of a painting.

9. Accepting responsibility/consequences - Theo suggests to Denise, Cliff and Clair that they should not clean up the mess Rudy has made with the juicer in the kitchen, because if they do, Rudy will never learn responsibility. Astonished and taken back by Theo's insight, Clair quietly agrees with him.

10. Appropriate expression of anger/displeasure - Theo is crushed to find Denise's female friend has a steady boyfriend and now he is carelessly stomping in his mother's garden to chase the basketball while playing in the back yard, yet looking very forlorn. Cliff comes out to discipline him for damaging the garden: "Eh,...hey! hey! hey! That's your mother's garden. Come outta there. (Theo steps on a plant) Oh! Wait, you stepped on that. We have to eat that stuff!" Cliff says in a complaining way.

11. Spending special time together - Grandma listens to Rudy tell her knock-knock jokes in the kitchen and laughs heartily at these jokes that are not very funny. Grandma has given Rudy her undivided attention.

12. Modeling values/beliefs - At the beginning of the episode in which Rudy discovers the snake, Cliff is cooking dinner, wearing an apron. He appears to be comfortable in this non-traditional activity for the father of the family, and models both the activity and the attitude.

DISCUSSION

The data systematically establish the extensive portrayal of relationship-enhancing communication skills and techniques as a frequent ingredient of this well-liked situation comedy. These heuristic findings confirm the consistent presence of healthy interpersonal communication in a highly successful prime-time situation comedy and validate the idea that a television show can be commercially popular and entertaining while at the same time modeling psychologically healthy behavior.

Television programming executives and production company executives might want to pay particular attention to the interesting co-existence of huge commercial success and frequent, consistent portrayals of psychologically healthy family communication skills in the same situation comedy. The high ratings The Cosby Show has enjoyed could be related to results of a selective exposure study by Zillmann, et. al. (1980), in which subjects in a bad mood avoided situation comedy fare featuring hostile humor and acrimonious relationships. Such a preference for programming devoid of hostile humor could help to explain the consistently strong preferences shown in the ratings for this program and reflect audience preference for humor and interactions which build self-esteem rather than diminish it in the characters.

Future research needs to be done to determine if such relationship-enhancing communication techniques are capable of adding to audience enjoyment or affecting audience selection of programs. Television network programming executives and

production companies could accrue financial benefits from such program preferences while simultaneously providing potentially healthy interaction models in program content.

A second major consideration emerging from the data is the issue of the impact on viewer behavior of the frequently modeled interpersonal communication techniques in the program. The modeling of parenting and other family communication skills identified in this research could be cognitively acquired by the viewer and imitated or practiced in real-life interactions (Bandura, 1977). Portrayed behaviors on such television programs could be useful as examples or springboards for discussion of relevant issues and events among family members (for example, discussing at mealtime or bedtime), as well as incorporation into actual behaviors by parents or children. The Cosby Show could be suggested also by family counselors as an adjunct to communication skills training or counseling. It has been shown that advertised parental education messages on television change parental attitudes and behaviors (Ratcliffe and Wittman, 1983), and the intrusive television entertainment fare of relationship-enhancing family behavior, such as The Cosby Show, especially if watched intentionally for modeling purposes, could be beneficial to viewers' communication abilities and relationships. Communication education programs could incorporate salient issues or scenarios portrayed in the television show to model effective interaction skills or stimulate discussion and awareness about communication skills, styles and situations.

Leifer, et. al. (1974) suggested that parents might be able to mediate the impact television viewing has on their children by discussing content and viewing experiences to which the children are exposed. The Cosby Show offers such an opportunity for parents to become more involved in the children's viewing and to focus on family issues and effective ways to discuss them and interact about them.

Future research could address these possible uses and the extent of impact on family interaction of the extensively modeled skills identified in the findings. Comparison of The Cosby Show to one or more other situation comedies needs to be done to see if The Cosby Show is unique in its frequent portrayal of the types of family interactions analyzed in this study. The financial benefits and improved family functioning make these research questions important to pursue.

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Table 1

Family interaction skills, frequency of appearance, and related models

Skill	Frequency	Model
1. Reflecting content/feeling	5	Gordon, Guerney Lerman
2. Alternatives instead of commands	3	Gordon, Lerman
3. Composure in the face of sensitive/emotional issues	6	Gordon, Guerney, Lerman
4. Taking decisions/behavior to logical conclusion	2	Lerman
5. Setting limits	5	Lerman
6. Role-play to show consequences/generate insight	8	Gordon, Guerney, Lerman
7. Encourage expression and awareness of feelings/ behavior	4	Gordon, Guerney, Lerman
8. Sharing problem-solving/tasks with children	3	Gordon, Guerney, Lerman
9. Accepting responsibility/consequences for actions	2	Gordon, Lerman
10. Appropriate expression of anger/displeasure	3	Gordon, Guerney, Lerman
11. Spending special time together	4	Lerman
12. Modeling values/beliefs	4	Gordon, Lerman

FOOTNOTES

1. Ratings results were compiled from issues of Broadcasting magazine from October 6, 1986 to April 27, 1987.

2. A full description of all 49 incidents of protrayed interfamily communication skills and techniques is available from the author upon request. Write c/o Mass Communication Dept., West Georgia College, Carrollton, GA 30118.